

Welch Death May Figure in Hill

By Laurence Stern

Washington Post Staff Writer

The fatal shots fired in suburban Athens Tuesday at U.S. intelligence officer Richard S. Welch may figure importantly in the battle of public opinion in which the Central Intelligence Agency is now engaged in Congress.

CIA Director William E. Colby made it clear last week that Welch's death might be employed as an object lesson in pressing the agency's side of the impending argument over new guidelines for the conduct of the national security bureaucracy.

It is an argument that Colby and others at the CIA's Langley headquarters feel is now being dominated by the opposition in congressional hearings and in the press.

Colby, a professional manipulator of political process in faraway countries in his past CIA roles, now faces the final and supreme contest of public opinion in his career. This time the battleground is at home in Washington.

Colby took time out Wednesday to perform a chore that no one would expect the head of the U.S. intelligence

establishment to occupy himself with. He personally denounced a press release issued by Fifth Estate, a group of radical, young pamphleteers who have been heckling the intelligence system for three years from a scruffy suite of offices adjoining Dupont Circle.

Fifth Estate had issued its statement in response to what it charged were unattributed attacks in newspapers by the CIA's press spokesman, Angus M. Thuermer, and overt claims by retired clandestine operations officer David Phillips that Fifth Estate was responsible in part for the murder of Welch.

In the statement, Fifth Estate denied responsibility and said, "If anyone is to blame for Mr. Welch's death, it is the CIA that sent him there to spy . . ."

News Analysis

The significance in what might otherwise pass for a routine Washington public relations skirmish is that Fifth Estate, whose members include Vietnam veterans and former government intelligence officers, was the first left-wing institution of the post-Vietnam war era to devote itself full time to muckraking the intelligence community.

It publishes revelations gathered from the foreign press and other sources on U.S. intelligence operations in a quarterly magazine, "Counterspy," which seems constantly at the brink of financial collapse.

Among the information published in recent issues was that Welch was CIA station chief in Peru. He subsequently had been moved to Athens, which was unknown to the editors of Counterspy.

Fifth Estate describes itself as an "adversary organization" that seeks to blow the whistle on abuses of

power by national security bureaucrats in the U.S. and abroad. Its political line, reflecting the view of one of its mentors, former CIA covert operations case officer Philip B.F. Agee, is that the CIA has become a tool of repressive elites in many countries of the Third World.

It is not surprising that the CIA should fix its sights on Fifth Estate in pressing its case that the publicizing of agency operations and personnel has gone too far. From the agency's standpoint it is also far more palatable to make the case against an obscure left-wing group on Dupont Circle than a congressional select committee on Capitol Hill.

Colby denounced Fifth Estate for what he called its "irresponsible and paranoid attack" on employees of his

should be permitted to go in revealing the supposed secrets of the CIA and other national security agencies.

The answers depend to some extent on the political and institutional interests of the beholder. Nonetheless, there are boundaries to the argument and some factual underpinnings that are likely to become obscured in the rhetoric and emotion of the debate.

At one pole of the dispute is the Agee position, which calls for exposure of American agents abroad in order to "neutralize," as he puts it, "the CIA's support to repression" in countries where it can significantly control political processes through covert funding, electoral manipulation or espionage.

The trend toward exposure

Battle

Colby urged the Senate panel not to publish any names of CIA officials involved in the assassination schemes in order that they and their families not become targets of reprisal.

The committee ignored both requests, though it deleted most CIA names on its own initiative. Despite Colby's entreaties, it did publish 12 CIA names in the assassination report.

Security leaks have been a major obsession of Presidents, especially Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. But it has yet to be demonstrated that there have been any major security breaches in the press of material that has not been available to foreign governments through other channels. Furthermore, a good deal of